

Katie's Story



Guilt can be a strange thing, to most people it is about having regret in actions that you have taken.

Guilty is about being at fault for doing something that is wrong.

But for children who have a parent or family member in prison Guilt can be something that they carry on their shoulders for loving that person when society deems that person should not be a part of our society. Guilty is how society makes them feel when they haven't done anything wrong.

Feelings of Guilt/Guilty is something that has touched my child through no fault of his own!

I introduced my son to my partner not long before he went to prison and society, professionals and family have tried to make me feel guilty for bringing him into my sons' life.

Just over 2 years ago my partner was sent to prison and sentenced to a long stint and I could never have envisioned the turmoil that proceeded and how our lives would be turned upside down!

My son has grown up for most of his life with his parents having separated, seeing his dad every other weekend, and while I have no intention of trying to get in the way of this relationship it has been hard, as his dad has always blamed me for the separation and whenever I started a new relationship, things would become quite tense. Not many people could cope with this so finding someone who loved me enough to stick it through the hard times was tough. But that also meant that my son lived with rejection and often questioned why someone wasn't sticking around. When my partner came into his life, things were different. They immediately struck up a bond that was not forced! They both loved the same things and would always chat away about cars, nerf fights and football, something that I could never quite relate to! There was no jealousy on my sons' part that someone else was taking up my attention as he felt included in everything we did, but at the back of my mind I was questioning whether this was going to last as I knew there was a high possibility that he was going to go to prison. The guilt should have been on my shoulders for even providing an opportunity for them to know each other, but I don't regret it and would do the same if time could be turned back, as they have a brilliant bond that has been good for them both, but definitely not easy!

The day my partner got a call from his barrister to say that he would have to go to court was hell! Panic flooded our minds and I reached out to someone I knew had been in prison to prepare us as much as possible. What to take to court, what couldn't be taken, how much money to take with him, addresses, stamps, clothes, toiletries, the things that we all take for granted. Then I had to break it to my son that my partner was going to go away for a potentially long time. His world was destroyed!

The weekend before court we had a day out together which was amazing, and we think back to that day regularly. I am so glad we had that opportunity, but we almost didn't due to court trying to get him to go in sooner.

The day before court I picked my son up from school and we headed down to stay the night at my partners house where his whole family were getting together for a final meal before the trauma of the next few years were to begin!

This is where my sons' journey of guilt began.

Everyone around him questioned me, questioned him, how can you love someone who has committed a crime. He was 8 years old! My family refused to allow my son a space to talk about him, and still do. My son's dad and members of my family were openly negative about the relationship. Photos had to be hidden around the house in case it sparked up a judgmental comment or look. We had taken a photo of the two of them together the morning that my partner went to court and my son wanted that in a frame which he still keeps on his bedside table two years on, yet if family visited, I hid it out of sight as I didn't want him to feel guilty for having it. I also didn't want the accusations to start again of why I would encourage them to continue to have a bond. Not once have I forced their bond, there are days/weeks where he doesn't want to talk to him on the phone, and there are other times where he runs for the phone before I reach it and chats for ages before reluctantly handing it over to me.

The first few months were awful, I was in tears a lot of the time, trying to hold everything together, be a mother to my son, as well as be strong for my partner, and at times this pressure overwhelmed me. My son found those times hard because he was hurting too, but we held each other close, and we are still standing.

For the first year my partners nieces and nephews didn't know where he was, and my son found it hard keeping it to himself. He felt guilty that he knew and they didn't, he was always asking if they knew yet, as he wanted someone else to talk to that missed him as much as he did, but he was mature for his age and accepted why they were being told he was working away, but it was also a lot for him to carry on his shoulders.

My family didn't help the situation as my son picked up very quickly that they did not want to acknowledge that my partner existed, but that meant he became quiet when he was around them, angry even at times. I knew exactly what was going through his head, I wanted to shout and scream at them for not putting their prejudices aside for the sake of my child, but I knew it wouldn't make a difference and would only result in them putting more guilt onto my shoulders for bringing my partner into my sons' life and that I was to blame.

When my son was at school I worried for him, worried that people were going to look at him differently, treat him differently, stop their children from having anything to do with him because of the crime my partner committed, and every time he came home telling me who he had talked to my anxiety for the implications increased. Why should he be judged for loving someone that had made a mistake in life and was openly taking responsibility and facing the consequences?

My son has gone through so many emotions, being angry with me, the world, my partner and his dad! He has had periods of times when he has refused to talk about how he is feeling, he has acted out and lied about things as well as breaking down and crying.

When it comes to his dad he has struggled with loyalty and guilt. He has been torn. He loves his dad, but he also loves my partner. This has created some difficulties and left my son feeling guilty about his relationship with my partner.

He has been angry that he can't see my partner in prison. He blames his dad and me, but prison isn't the place for him to go, but how do you explain that to a child?

No one talks about prison, so he doesn't know who is going through the same thing as him. He doesn't have any friends around him that truly understand how he is feeling. Again, how do you explain to a child that not everyone understands what he is going through and why they are reacting negatively when they hear about it?

My son's guilt is expressed by anger or shutting me out. I want to wrap him up and protect him from all the negativity, but this is the world that we live in. he is an innocent and yet society makes him feel bad for loving someone that has messed up part of their life!

I reached out to Children Heard and Seen during lockdown as my son was having trouble thinking about what to write in letters to my partner. They had put together a resource of letter templates for children. I am so glad I made contact with them! I had always assumed that they couldn't help us as my son was not related to my partner and didn't fall into the category of parental imprisonment, but I am so glad I wrote that message on twitter to them! They have been amazing, not only providing support to my son, but connecting me with other parents who are going through the same struggles as me. The summer residential at Hill End was fantastic, and while my son was reluctant in engaging in the virtual activities they provided on zoom, he finally felt free at Hill End, having fun with the other children that knew exactly what he was going through. He hasn't stopped mentioning that he can't wait until the next residential!

We try and raise children with empathy and to have forgiveness, yet the society that we live in does everything but offer forgiveness. Children are taught that they have to say sorry if they do something wrong and then they are told to make up and become friends again, yet society teaches a different lesson. Children are taught that they have to accept punishment for a wrongdoing, whether it's time-out, the 'naughty step', toys being taken off them for a period of time, or missing out on something they were looking forward to, but then are forgiven, however society gives the message that once

a criminal, always a criminal. How is this right? They say that adults should know better and that a child is still learning, but how can an adult make changes if they are going to be forever judged for their crime that they have endured punishment for in prison? As an adult I am confused, I can't imagine what is going through a child's mind?

I am proud that my son has a strong relationship with my partner! I love the bond that they have and the plans they are making together for the future! My partner is providing a lesson that society hasn't got the hang of yet! He is teaching my son that yes people make mistakes, however it is important to be honest about the mistakes that one makes, hold your hands up and accept the punishment that is given.

Accountability is important, but use that punishment to learn from your mistakes, make changes to become a better person and don't give up hope of happiness and a better future as with support, guidance, love and compassion anything is possible! I can't wait for the day that my partner is released and we can finally look forward in life again!